

Dictatory: A New Method of Giving Dictation

By Myo Kyaw Myint

Dictation has always been a rather controversial activity in the language classroom. At the same time, it has been a surprisingly popular one as well. In spite of its obvious limitations, it is still favored as a teaching device especially in situations where some sort of standardization is required. One example would be a large number of students divided into many different sections. Many language teachers may view dictation negatively, believing that it hardly teaches anything and while it has some value as a testing device, there are other testing devices that are equally or even more effective. However, the need for standardization may override other considerations and force teachers to put up with dictation even though they are fully aware of its disadvantages. Such is the case for teachers of English at Assumption University, Thailand. The following reasons are cited for employing dictation as a teaching device at Assumption University:

1. Giving the dictation right at the beginning of the class forces the students to be punctual.
2. The dictation gives badly needed practice in listening comprehension. This is particularly important in a university like Assumption University, where the medium of instruction is English and where the instructors consist not only of native speakers of English, but also of Thais, Burmese, Filipinos, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangalese. Hence, students need to have excellent listening skills to comprehend their lessons and to be familiar with a more "international style" of English.
3. The dictation forces students to write at least 35 or 40 words in English every day and thus improves their general writing skill and perhaps increases their vocabulary.
4. By making every English class begin with a dictation, some sort of uniformity or standardization is achieved (This is clearly the most important function of dictation for teachers of English at Assumption University).

In this article I do not wish to argue for or against the use of dictation as a teaching device as employed by teachers at Assumption University. Instead, I would like to describe the way the dictations are used as a teaching technique in the university as a whole and then recount my own method for turning what might be an unpleasant or a difficult chore for both teachers and students into an enjoyable learning activity.

First let us look at the way teachers are expected to make use of the dictation at Assumption University. The following is typical of instructions given to teachers of English:

- a. All selected passages for dictation for this course must consist of at least 40 words. All dictation passages must be written on the board and at least five words must be explained to the students. The instructor must ensure that no cheating takes place during the dictation.

- b. Each dictation should be read only three times. The first and the last readings should be done at normal speed. The second reading should be slow and clear. No explanation is needed during the reading.
- c. Mark allocation: 5 marks per dictation 2 mistakes = 1 mark off *mistakes include punctuation
- d. Dictation should be given at the beginning of each class and should be corrected by the instructor only.

While teachers are expected to follow the above instructions, within the limits of these instructions they do have relative freedom to do as they please. That is, they can choose their own dictation passages; and they can select the level of difficulty that they deem fit for their students. In one semester, a normal English class would meet 30 times for one and a half hours each. Since teachers are expected to give a dictation in every period, the total mark allocated to dictation would come to 150 (5 x 30). However, in reality, the mark is cut to 75 so that each dictation counts for only two and a half marks. This is still substantial and forces students to be punctual so as not to lose marks on dictation.

The following explains how I attempted to make the most out of a situation which I found difficult. I had never been a big fan of dictation as a teaching device. Like Claude Marcel, I believe that, "In any language in which orthography does not exactly correspond to the pronunciation, dictation is inefficient, since the writer has, thereby, no clue by which he can infer the mode of writing it from the manner in which it is uttered" (Marcel 1853). There is almost universal agreement that dictation should not be used as a teaching device but rather as a testing device. H. Cartledge, for instance, proclaims confidently that, "Dictation, then, is not a teaching exercise but a testing exercise, and contextualization of this kind is an excellent way of assessing a student's grasp of current speech" (Cartledge 1968). Even so, it can be argued that there are other testing devices that are far superior to dictation.

In attempting to make use of dictation in my classroom, I had to ask myself the following questions:

- 1. How can I make my students enjoy what is essentially a boring and somewhat incomprehensible exercise?
- 2. Since I am expected to give the dictation in every class, how can I inject a note of continuity into the exercise?
- 3. How can I make my students learn something from the exercise?

My solution to the problem as I saw it was a new way of giving dictation which I have termed, "dictatory." Basically, I turned my dictation into a continuous short story so that instead of being bombarded with unconnected dictation passages in every English class, my students found themselves listening to short paragraphs which together made up a short story. In this way, I was able to get them interested in the dictation passages and also inject a vital note of continuity into the dictation exercise. In fact, as my students caught on to what I was doing, they actually started asking me questions about the story and showed a genuine interest in the plot. All of a sudden, the dictation became something more than a mechanical exercise which had to be tolerated

because of the marks they were given for it. In fact, a number of the students actually told me that they looked forward to the dictation every day.

As the students became more interested in the exercise, their skills at it also improved. This was due to a number of reasons:

1. They were paying more attention, so they heard and understood more.
2. They were thinking ahead trying to guess what would happen in the story. This enabled them to make educated guesses.
3. They were not merely doing a mechanical exercise, but instead were involved in a real communicative situation.
4. Last but not least, it was made certain that a number of words they were learning and certain structures or patterns that they were being taught were incorporated into the "dictatory."

Although the "dictatory" meant more work for the teacher, it was certainly work worth doing. It changed a mechanical and often misunderstood exercise into a fun-filled activity from which both the teacher and the students benefited.

For those who would like to try the "dictatory" method, two of the stories I have used in my class are provided below:

Story 1: The Son

She had received a phone call last night that had made her unable to sleep. He, that is, the caller had told her simply that he would come to see her the following day. He refused to tell her who he was.

(day 1: 42 words)

She waited breathlessly in her office. She kept her eyes fixed on the clock. It was nearly time. He had told her that he would come at nine sharp and it was nearly five to nine. Her heart was beating loudly as she waited for him.

(day 2: 46 words)

First she heard his footsteps just outside her door. She had told her secretary to let him in whoever he might be. Slowly, the door opened. Her heart was on fire as slowly someone came into her office. She kept her eyes tightly shut.

(day 3: 44 words)

"Hello, mother," said the boy who appeared to be thirteen or fourteen years of age. She was so shocked she could not speak. She tried once or twice to open her mouth, but no words would come out of it.

(day 4: 40 words)

"They told me you'd be surprised to see me," continued this young boy she had never seen before. "What do you mean by calling me, mother?" she finally found her voice. "Exactly what it means-you are my mother, aren't you?" said the young stranger.

(day 5: 45 words)

She had no answer to that. She was left speechless. She wondered, "Could it be true? Could the boy be telling the truth?" When she was very young she had given birth to a boy. But she had been told that he was stillborn.

(day 6: 44 words)

"Well, mother. Are you going to welcome me or not?" demanded the boy rather coldly. "I really don't know what to say. It's all so sudden, don't you see?" She replied rather weakly. "Perhaps, this will convince you that I am telling the truth."

(day 7: 44 words)

It was the wedding ring she had given to her sister long ago. "You were so wrapped up with dad's accident they didn't think you could take care of me. So they told you I was dead. But I am not. Here I am now."

(day 8: 45 words)

I use a story for only two weeks since after two weeks, the students tend to become bored with the story line. It can be seen that the above story allows the students to engage in a number of other meaningful classroom activities if the teacher so desires. For instance, every day for about ten or fifteen minutes, the students can discuss what is likely to happen next in the story. Such an activity not only allows students to practice their speaking skills, but also helps to whet their appetite for the story so that they would remain interested in the story.

Let me conclude with another story I have employed more or less successfully in my class.

Story 2: Who Did It?

"Well," Inspector Smith said, "the man is definitely dead." "The question, then, is who killed him?" added Detective Roberts. The man in question was a certain Mr. Richard Hager, who now lay in a pool of blood. He was obviously, very dead.

(day 1: 42 words)

The first suspect was Mrs. Hager. She was of foreign descent and had never really loved her husband. They had quarreled continuously. She was also known to have a violent temper and to be fond of weapons. But could she have killed Mr. Hager? Who knows?

(day 2: 46 words)

A more likely suspect was Mr. Hincholift. He was a business associate of the deceased. He had a lot to gain from Mr. Hager's death. It was well known that he did not like Mr. Hager. But could he have stabbed his associate to death?

(day 3: 45 words)

The third suspect was Mr. Hager's own daughter. She was known to be mentally unstable and had a history of violent attacks on people. Perhaps she went crazy one day and simply stabbed her own father to death. It was quite possible.

(day 4: 42 words)

The police questioned all three suspects carefully. Each had an airtight alibi. Each admitted that it could have been him or her but insisted it wasn't. But the man was dead. Someone must have killed him. The question was, "Who?"

(day 5: 40 words)

Inspector Smith suspected that it was the business associate. He had a good alibi, but Smith knew it proved nothing. Mr. Hincholift was an ex-convict. He would have no remorse about killing a man. Besides, he stood to gain a lot from Mr. Hager's death.

(day 6: 45 words)

Detective Roberts thought that the wife had done it. She had a good alibi, but she could not hide her joy that her husband was dead. Perhaps, she had hired someone to do it. That was a real possibility and he promised to look into the matter.

(day 7: 45 words)

Fortunately for everyone concerned, the real murderer confessed. It was a homeless man who had not meant to kill his victim. He had just wanted some money. It was all an accident. He didn't want to see anyone arrested for the crime that he committed.

(day 8: 45 words)

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References

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